

49 of 761 DOCUMENTS

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City workers hit the books to seek fuel tank's origin

BYLINE: Asher Price American-Statesman Staff**SECTION:** METRO; Pg. B01**LENGTH:** 489 words

Determined to figure out the back story of an underground tank whose overflowing fuel oil caused a mess in downtown Austin last week, city employees are headed to the library.

The unexpected bubbling up of oil, and the subsequent contamination of **Waller Creek**, has led to questions about the provenance of the decades-old, perhaps century-old, storage tank, which had apparently escaped the attention, regulation and mapping of the city, the state and nearby landowners.

"These old tanks predate any kind of regulation," city environmental compliance specialist Stan Tindel said. "That's a problem. If they got abandoned, there's no record of it anywhere."

Oil from the tank, which is under an alley between Congress Avenue and Brazos Street and just north of Sixth Street, was forced to the surface after an underground water line broke Thursday, flooding the area. The city now says that 4,000 gallons of it made its way through a storm drain system into **Waller Creek**.

As the city looks for the history of this and other storage tanks, which were used to store oil for heating and lighting, it is also trying to put the present episode to rest.

On Monday, contractors and city employees worked to flush the storm drain system and to pump out and scrub down the sludge remaining in the storage tank ahead of expected rain. Meanwhile, the city said, tests of **Waller Creek** for PCBs, a chemical linked to cancer, came back negative.

The city monitors 1,500 underground fuel storage tanks that belong to about 500 facilities, most of them gas stations. Some institutions, like hospitals, also have tanks filled with diesel fuel to power emergency generators.

But the city's monitoring program began only in 1986, so city workers will have to comb through the leather-bound, chipped-paper archives to dig up ownership and history records of the steel tank that is 31 feet long and has a 9-foot diameter.

The state environmental commission does not regulate underground storage tanks used for on-site heating. And spokespeople for the nearest properties, the Littlefield office building and the Driskill Hotel, said they did not know whether the tank was connected to their properties. Workers haven't found pipes that lead to one specific building.

The fuel-oil tanks were rendered obsolete by reliable, centralized utility systems.

"A lot of times, they didn't get rid of them," said Schuyler Schwarting, head of the city's underground storage tank program. "They removed the fuel, capped them off and used the other utilities. They just got forgotten about. If not found like this, it would have been never known. There were no signs above ground, no venting, no holes to fill the tank."

Pinpointing the location of other storage tanks is one thing; removing them from beneath a tangle of gas, fiber-optic, water, sewage, telephone and electricity lines is another.

"It's just a spaghetti bowl on top of it," Schwarting said of the downtown tank.

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